

Panhandle Health District

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Foundation Works as a Public Health Vitamin

By Cynthia Taggart
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Hayden—Lora Cartelli beamed as she talked about the 800 Bonner County residents who use Bonner Partners in Care, a volunteer health clinic in Sandpoint that serves uninsured and under-insured people at very low costs.

“We’re delighted to get these funds and thought we’d use them explicitly for women’s ultrasounds,” Cartelli said, thanking Kay Kindig, chairman of the Panhandle Public Health Foundation (PPHF), for a \$1,000 grant to the clinic.

Theresa Hylsky, R.N., shared Cartelli’s gratitude. Hylsky, coordinator of the Public Health Nurse Home Visiting Program, had also received a \$1,000 grant from the foundation. The money will link registered nurses with parents of newborns in the five northern counties to increase the babies’ chances of a healthy start to life.

“The foundation’s grant gives us the ability to continue to see families,” said Hylsky, whose program depends on grants for survival. “To me, it’s such an honor and privilege to go into a family’s home and offer research-based education that helps them to be better parents.”

No one was more pleased about awarding grants than Kindig.

“We’d like to do this twice a year,” she said. “Expanding the reach of public health programs saves bigger problems and bigger costs down the line. We can do so much with prevention.”

PPHF is a young organization buzzing with passion. The idea entered Kindig’s consciousness when she directed the Panhandle Health District’s (PHD) Home Health division in the 1990s. Demand for services was greater than the health district could afford. Kindig read about a health department in Tulsa, Okla., that had a community foundation. It raised money to help those public health programs that never had enough funding.

Public health reaches out to the masses. It protects society with immunizations, vaccines during outbreaks, restaurant inspections, drinking water protection, cancer screening, programs to prevent sexually transmitted diseases, outbreak investigations and much more. Many of its fees vary by the income level of its clients. Grants and contracts support most of its services. Only 19 percent of PHD’s funding comes from the state and the five northern counties.

“There’s never enough funding for the need,” Kindig said.

The foundation idea never strayed far from her mind, but she had little time to develop it. She retired in 2001 after serving two years as the health district’s director, and new director, Jeanne Bock, suggested Kindig turn her dream into reality. Bock, who is still PHD’s director, applied for the non-profit status and Kindig volunteered to chair the new foundation.

“Public health is for everyone and everyone benefits from a foundation that keeps its programs going and helps them grow,” Bock said.

Kindig and her volunteer board were motivated to pour energy into the foundation’s development as health district programs struggled. PHD had to end a homemaker service for senior citizens when the demand for the service outpaced the federal grant that supported it. Another service that matches senior companions with seniors who need help grocery shopping or going to doctors’ appointments had a waiting list with 200 names and no extra money to expand.

Kindig set up the foundation separate from the health district so it could help any non-profit health-related programs in the five northern counties including PHD. The senior companion program

organized a benefit featuring one of the authors of the Chicken Soup series and gave the proceeds to the foundation. PHD's staff held two internal silent auctions and donated the proceeds from those to the foundation.

Last spring, the PPHF invited applications for its first grants. Eight organizations applied for such services as bereavement libraries and child abuse prevention programs, medical services for the uninsured and professional guidance for new parents.

Kindig was pleased with the response.

"It was real innovative. Public health is not just about epidemiology (disease investigation). It's about prevention," she said.

Bonner Partners in Care provides health care for minor and chronic problems and helps patients get needed medications, lab tests and other specialized services. Only the program director is paid. The medical and support staff is all volunteer. The PPHF grant will help patients pay for doctor-recommended specialized tests, procedures, labs and medications.

"One of the most frequent referrals we get from PHD is for help with women's pelvic and abdominal ultrasounds," Cartelli said.

The Public Health Nurse Home Visiting Program operates out of PHD with funding from the Idaho Children's Trust Fund, PHD and, now, PPHF. It matches nine registered nurses in the five northern counties with families of newborns that are struggling for any reason—prematurity, income, disabilities, family disharmony, teen parenthood. Nurses visit in their homes once or twice, then stay available for phone consultations for up to three years.

Nurses assess family support and baby health and offer parenting education that builds family strengths and minimizes harmful behaviors.

The PPHF will enable the Home Visiting Program to serve 15 additional families.

These grants are just the beginning, Kindig said. PHD staff will hold another silent auction this month to raise money for the foundation. PPHF has organized its first benefit bike ride, Pedalin' for Public Health, for Aug. 25 to raise money for future grants.

Participants of the 15- to 30-mile ride on the Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes will receive all the public health perks: bottles of hand sanitizer, packets of sunscreen, even mini-first aid kits. People who register by Aug. 17 will receive t-shirts for the \$25 entry fee and raffle tickets for a Buck knife.

But the biggest perk for participants is knowing they're helping expand the reach of public health.

"A little bit of help is like a gift from heaven," Kindig said.

To register for Pedalin' for Public Health or to donate to the Panhandle Public Health Foundation, visit www.pphf.net.